

# Shabir Ally's Responses

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## Evaluating the Debate Between Jay Smith and Shabir Ally

On the topic:

**The Bible or the Quran—Which is the Word of God?**

Shabir Ally

Oct. 5, 2014

Is the Bible the Word of God? Is the Quran the Word of God? How can we approach these questions in an objective manner and prevent our own biases from deciding the questions in advance? I argued in the debate that we need to start with neutral criteria based on which to evaluate both books.

### The need for criteria

The need for criteria should be evident to everyone. Suppose we are debating whether an object is or is not a fish. It will help to first agree on the essential and exclusive characteristics of fishes. For example, fishes have gills. Now we can look at the object in question and see whether or not it has gills.

What if someone says that fishes stink, and this thing stinks, therefore this thing is a fish? He would be wrong if the thing he is looking at is a rotten egg. The error in his reasoning is that he started with a characteristic which is not exclusive to fish.

Suppose someone argues that fishes stink, and this thing does not stink, therefore this thing is not a fish? He would be wrong if the object he is looking at happens to be a sort of fish that does not stink. The obvious problem in his reasoning here is that he started with a non-essential characteristic of fishes. It is not necessary for all fish to stink.

Moreover, whether or not a thing stinks is subjective. Some things may stink to everyone. Some other things may stink to some people but not to others. It turns out, then, that we may need neutral and objective criteria to decide on questions as simple as the question of whether or not something is a fish.

The criteria for classification are even more necessary when we attempt to classify a book as the Word of God. Hence it is important for Jay and me to start with neutral and objective criteria if we are going to decide fairly on the question of whether or not the Bible and the Quran are divine Scriptures.

It is elementary that whatever criteria we introduce, we should be willing to apply them to both books. For example, if I say that the Bible cannot be the Word of God because it has red letters, this is clearly an arbitrary criterion, and hence unacceptable from the start. More to my point here, however, is that once I have introduced this criterion, I have to apply the same criterion against the Quran as well. What will I say when someone shows me a Quran containing red letters? I cannot reply that this criterion applies to the Bible while the Quran is spared the enquiry. These principles of fairness and balance should be second-nature to Muslims and Christians. Hence it is fair to expect that Jay and I must measure both books against

whatever criterion we propose.

## Five Criteria

In the debate, I proposed five criteria, drawn from the Bible, for evaluating both books. Here are the criteria together with the locations in the Bible from where each criterion is derived:

1. The book should be divinely inspired (2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:21);
2. The book's contents should be beneficial for teaching (2 Timothy 3: 16);
3. The book should not contain a false prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:22);
4. The book should not invite people to worship a god other than the God of the Israelite forefathers (Deuteronomy 13:3); and
5. The book should not contain a major internal contradiction (Mark 3:25 and 1 Corinthians 14:33).

How did the two books measure up against these fair criteria? I have shown that the Bible failed on all of these criteria, whereas the Quran passed. Meanwhile, the Bible's defender abandoned his defense of the Bible and said openly that the Bible is not the Word of God—Jesus is the Word of God. So, we started out with two books, and our question was, "Which of the two is the Word of God?" After Jay's declaration that the Bible is not the Word of God, we were down to one book.

It was only in Jay's closing remarks, when I had no opportunity to respond, that he changed his tune and said that the Bible is "a word of God." To be sure, he kept holding up the Bible and the Quran to emphasize that it is the Bible that should be followed rather than the Quran. But his earlier declaration that the Bible is not the Word of God essentially was a cop out of any responsibility to defend the Bible.

## Jay's Implicit Criteria

On the other hand, Jay attacked the Quran mainly on two grounds. First, ancient manuscripts of the Quran vary from each other, and also from the 1924 Egyptian edition of the Quran that we now hold in our hands. Second, the Quran contains borrowed tales from other sources.

Here I'll deal with the second claim first. I mentioned during the debate Sidney Griffith's view that the Quran was not merely repeating these stories but was using the stories to draw out its own teaching.<sup>[1]</sup> Moreover, I referred to the view of Fred Donner who said that even if we find the prophet copying from other books this would not count against the belief that the prophet was inspired by God to do so.<sup>[2]</sup>

In view of my discussion above regarding criteria, however, we can see that Jay's implicit criterion which he is using to measure the Quran is that if a book copies from other sources then it cannot be an inspired book. Now, if he applies the same criterion to the Bible, then the Bible will fail on this criterion, since it is notorious that the Bible's 2 Peter and Jude contain material drawn from apocryphal sources. Hence Jay is not using his criteria consistently.

Jay argued that this criterion applies only against the Quran since Muslims believe that the Quran came down from heaven. And, to Jay this means that the Quran cannot contain material that seems to have been copied from books on earth. There are many ways of answering this claim against the Quran, and such answers are already being commonly given by other Muslims in defense of the Quran.

But here I want to draw attention to a major flaw in Jay's approach. When Jay argues as he does above, he is speaking off topic. The topic is not, "Is the Muslim view of the Quran right or wrong?" The topic is, "The Bible or the Quran—Which is the Word of God?" The difference between the actual topic and Jay's presumed topic is significant because, logically, it is possible that the Quran is the Word of God, but not in the way in

which most Muslims think. Hence Jay has to start with neutral criteria not for assessing whether the specific Muslim idea of the Quran is correct, but whether or not the Quran is the Word of God more generally. In sum, it is not enough for him to argue that the Quran did not come down from heaven. It is necessary for him to show that the Quran does not fit his criteria which he is also willing to apply to the Bible.

The same flaw will now be seen in his first objection to the Quran, his finding that manuscripts vary from each other and from today's popular Quran. Here too, he is arguing that the Muslim idea that the Quran is eternal and unchanged is wrong. But he excludes the Bible from being measured against this criterion, because Christians do not hold that the Bible is eternal and unchanged. Here too, he is arguing off topic. The topic is not, "Is the Christian idea of the Bible as the Word of God correct; and is the Muslim idea of the Quran as the Word of God correct?" The actual topic is more general than that. To properly address the actual topic, Jay needs to use neutral criteria for a book to be the Word of God and then apply those criteria to both books. Of course if his presumed criterion is that a book cannot be the Word of God if its manuscripts vary from each other and from today's copies of that book, then the Bible will fail on this criterion.

## Define Your Terms!

In a debate, it sometimes becomes necessary for the parties to define the subject they are discussing. It is enough for two parties to have two different views on the same subject. But a failure to define the subject sometimes results in confusion because one party is discussing one subject and the other party is discussing another subject. The fact that they are using the same name for the two subjects gives the impression that they disagree about that subject. But if they take the time to clarify what specifically they are talking about the confusion will be alleviated.

Now let's clarify two apparently similar concepts of the Quran. For Muslims generally, there is no difference between the Quran promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad, on whom be peace and the Quran we hold in our hands today. But Jay is arguing that there is a difference. So, to avoid prejudging the issue, let's speak here of two Qurans which may be identical in the final conclusion, but which we treat as separate for the purpose of our discussion. I will thus refer to the Prophet's Quran and the present Quran as two distinct concepts.

It is clear that usually Muslim apologists will argue that the Prophet's Quran is miraculous, and that the present Quran is also miraculous by virtue of being identical to the Prophet's Quran. And now Jay's challenge to Muslims is to prove that the present Quran is the same as the Prophet's Quran. Jay's implicit reasoning here is as follows. If I cannot prove that the present Quran is the same as the Prophet's Quran, then even if the Prophet's Quran was miraculous, we do not have that miracle today. In other words, even if the Prophet's Quran was the Word of God, today's Quran cannot claim to be the Word of God since it is not an exact copy of the original.

This was Jay's implicit argument from the beginning to the end of the debate. But in arguing in this way, Jay has missed the essential distinction I have made in the debate. I have taken pains to specify that what I am talking about is what I am calling here the present Quran: the 1924 Egyptian edition which is now everywhere among Muslims. I said this not only once but numerous times throughout the debate. I was not arguing that the present Quran is the Word of God by virtue of its being an identical copy of the Prophet's Quran. Whether or not it is an identical copy is besides the point that I was arguing. I was arguing that the present Quran is the Word of God by virtue of the evidence of mathematical patterns in the present Quran.

## Two Distinct Paradigms

This distinction makes a significant difference. On the standard Muslim presentation, the Muslim has to prove that the present Quran is basically what the Prophet promulgated. In that case, the question being addressed is, "How do we know that the present Quran is miraculous?" And the Muslim answer is that we know this because the present Quran is basically the miraculous Quran promulgated by the Prophet 1,400 years ago. And the Christian debater then asks the Muslim debater to deal with all the manuscript evidence. The onus here is on the Muslim to prove that the present Quran is basically the same as the Prophet's Quran.

On my presentation, however, the situation is reversed. My argument is not seriously challenged by the manuscript evidence. I argue as follows:

Muslims and Christians agree against Atheists that patterns in nature, especially mathematical patterns, point to a designer—God. Hence if we find mathematical patterns in the present Quran, this would point to a designer. This designer could be either a human or God. But it is not any human, as Jay and I both know. Therefore God is the designer of the present Quran. In short, the present Quran is the inspired Word of God.

## Attempts at Falsification

Anyone can attempt to disprove my argument in one of the following two ways. First, one can look back in history along the lines leading to the production of the present Quran to see if someone, somewhere, deliberately and calculatedly created the patterns that we now observe. Since Jay had so much to say about the history of the Quran, during the debate I challenged him to tell us who put these mathematical patterns in the Quran. Was it a caliph? A king? Someone else? Who? Jay did not attempt to name anyone, or even to suggest that someone put these patterns in there deliberately and calculatedly. The reason for Jay's silence is understandable. Although we do not know everything about the Quran, we know enough about its history to be assured that no human did this. No one meddled with it so as to arrange its letters, words, verses and chapters to form the mathematical patterns which we now discover.

The second way in which anyone can attempt to disprove my argument is to show that the patterns I mentioned are nothing more than mere coincidence. For example, if it can be shown that similar patterns exist in other books, then no special claim can be made for the Quran on the basis of these patterns. I anticipated this objection, and during the debate I mentioned that in the case of one of the patterns, I had checked the results against ten books of the Bible. I checked the five books of the Torah, the Psalms, and the four Gospels. My objective was to see if the mathematical relationship which exists in the Quran between the chapter numbers and the number of verses within those chapters also exists in those books. The result was negative in the case of each of the ten books of the Bible which I examined. This, as I pointed out, does not mean that there is anything wrong with those books, since there is no reason why a book must have such a hidden pattern. But the search supports my conclusion that the pattern which exists in the Quran is unlikely to have arisen by pure chance.

Jay understood this second way of challenging my presentation. During the debate he said that the mathematician Martin Gardner had found that similar patterns exist also in the book Moby Dick. However, I rebutted Jay by saying that Martin Gardner was not speaking of the sort of pattern I presented. Gardner was responding to some other sorts of patterns which some researchers claimed to find in the Bible. Those are the sorts of patterns which Gardner and others have found to exist also in Moby Dick. In sum, Jay did not succeed in challenging my presentation based on this second possible way of disproof.

If I had cited only a few examples showing that things in the Quran are arranged mathematically, it would have been possible for someone to argue that the patterns I cited are not statistically significant. However, I forestalled this objection by citing many examples. Jay remarked that I had spent twenty-five minutes of my presentation dealing the subject. I expressed my doubt that I had spoken on the subject for that length of time. However, let's suppose that I did. Speaking at a normal rate, I must have presented many examples

showing the occurrence of that phenomenon in the Quran. Could Jay speak for just ten minutes, even going slowly, on the mathematical patterns which he found in Moby Dick?

In any case, the numerous examples I cited can be seen from a review of the debate. The two papers I handed out during the debate, and which should be used in conjunction with watching the debate, can now be seen here: <http://www.islaminfo.com/3/73/the-number-19-in-the-quran-a-sign-of-the-quran-s-divine-origin> and here: <http://www.islaminfo.com/3/74/the-quran-as-a-mathematical-miracle>.

Moreover, God willing, I will soon publish another paper showing examples of another category of mathematical patterns in the Quran. We will see that this new category intertwines with the other categories outlined in my previous papers. Hence with the introduction of this new category we will see that the mathematical patterns in the Quran interlock in highly complex relationships. Thus the possibility of these interlocking patterns arising by mere coincidence is much more difficult to imagine.

In sum, those are the two ways in which anyone can attempt to disprove my argument based on the mathematical patterns in the Quran. Either they can argue that some human being deliberately and calculatedly put the patterns in the Quran, or they can argue that the examples I cited are not enough to amount to anything more than sheer coincidence.

## Why Manuscripts do not Disprove my Claim

Arguing about the manuscripts is not a third way of disproving my argument. However, one can try to tie in the manuscripts with one of the above two ways. The manuscripts would tie in with the first way if one can show evidence from the manuscripts that someone was deliberately and calculatedly putting the patterns in the Quran. Jay did not attempt to show such evidence, and I do not believe that such evidence exists.

Or, the manuscripts would tie in with the second way if someone argues that the patterns I presented are found also in some ancient manuscripts of the Quran which differ from our present Quran. But this would not rebut my presentation, because I do not argue that the present Quran (which I specified above as the 1924 Egyptian edition) is the only acceptable Quran. In other words, let us suppose that similar mathematical patterns can be found in an ancient manuscript of the Quran or in another reading of the Quran. I would argue the case in the same manner as I have done with the present Quran. I would say that the pattern is a sign of the divine origin of the Quran in that manuscript as well, or in that other reading. As I mentioned in the debate, Muslims accept multiple authoritative readings of the Quran.

However, Jay did not tie in his discussion of manuscripts with any of the two possible ways in which one may attempt to dispel my argument. It is clear that his discussion of manuscripts was meant to refute the traditional presentation of the Quran wherein the onus would have been on the Muslim to show that the present Quran is a reproduction of the Prophet's Quran. In arguing thus about the manuscripts, Jay was not refuting my presentation. He was arguing against some other presentation.

Despite my numerous appeals to Jay and to the audience throughout the debate to understand that I was arguing from evidence that the present Quran is the Word of God, Jay did not get the point. Rather, he kept discussing the manuscripts. His discussion would have been relevant if I was presenting the common argument that the Prophet's Quran was inspired, and the present Quran is also inspired by virtue of being a reliable copy of the Prophet's Quran. But that is not what I was arguing. I was not arguing in favour of every aspect of Muslim belief related to the Quran. I kept my focus on what mattered most: my fair set of criteria for judging a book to be the Word of God, and the task of evaluating the Quran and the Bible based on that fair set of criteria.

## Red Herring Argument

From the above, it should be clear why I see Jay's discussion on manuscripts as a red herring in this debate. No one knows how the fallacy of red herring arguments came to be called by that name. But one theory is that when robbers were being chased by cops they would drag a smelly red herring across the path to distract the sniffing dogs. The dogs thus pursued the smelly red herring, and the robbers got away free.

In citing manuscript evidence Jay risked distracting us from what was important in the debate, though I am not suggesting that he deliberately tried to misdirect us. I am saying that Jay simply did not see the logic that followed from my argument. It often happens that when people are accustomed to seeing a thing from one direction they find it difficult to now see it from another direction. It will take time for someone to see the argument from another direction.

Jay has been accustomed to hearing Muslim apologists starting with the claim that the Prophet's Quran was inspired and then trying to trace the Prophet's Quran to our present Quran. I turned the sequence around with good reason. I argued that our present Quran was inspired, as is evident from its newly discovered mathematical patterns. Now our task is to find out the details of how the Quran came to be this way. In this case, we are starting from the vantage point that the Quran we hold in our hands is the Word of God. And we did not simply assume that. Rather, we gave good evidence to support that belief. Though Jay was listening to me, he was not hearing me. He did not realize that the direction of my approach was from the opposite direction to that which he was accustomed to.

The manuscript evidence he discussed needs to be dealt with. But the debate was not primarily about that. A book with an excellent manuscript history is not necessarily the Word of God. Nor is a book with a bad manuscript history necessarily not the Word of God. It is possible that God's providence ensured that we have his Word with us despite the changing circumstances of history. We can now look at the manuscripts from the vantage point of knowing that God wanted us to have and hold the 1924 Egyptian edition of the Quran. It will take time for Jay to see that, with this new mathematical evidence, a paradigm shift has occurred.

The real question, then, is what evidence is there that the books we now hold in our hands are the Word of God? The topic of our debate was not about who has the better manuscripts. The topic is bigger than that. Thus it is clear that Jay's discussion of the manuscripts was largely irrelevant to my argument. So, let's not follow the red herring. Let's evaluate the two books based on neutral criteria.

## **What Difference do the Manuscripts Make?**

The problem of criteria confronts us here again as we consider Jay's argument regarding the manuscripts of the Quran. Jay's argument may be summarized as follows. Christians have nothing to fear from manuscripts of the Bible because Christians do not hold that the Bible is unchanged. Rather, Christians are satisfied that no cardinal doctrine of Christianity is overturned by the discovery of ancient manuscripts. On the other hand, Muslims believe that the Quran is unchanged. Therefore they have to deal with discrepancies in the manuscripts.

It is true that Muslims will have to deal with the manuscripts even though, as I have explained above, the manuscripts were largely irrelevant to our recent debate. I expect that some Muslim students who are pursuing studies in the manuscripts will soon put out responses to Jay's specific claims. Here I want to reflect on Jay's criteria for deciding which book is the Word of God. As I explained above, Jay needs to apply the same criterion to both books. If he allows that the Bible is still the word of God despite changes made to it, provided that no cardinal doctrine rests on the changes, he has to allow the same for the Quran.

To disprove the Quran as the word of God on the basis of the manuscript evidence, therefore, Jay would have to show that the Quran has been changed to the extent that the cardinal doctrines of Islam rest on the changes. But this is not what Jay was arguing. Jay was simply trying to prove that the Muslim belief that the

Quran is unchanged is not true. But that is not the same as proving that the Quran is not the Word of God. Theoretically, it is possible that the Quran is mainly the Word of God except for some changes that do not stand as the basis for any cardinal doctrine of Islam.

Now, the cardinal doctrines of Islam are well known. There is no God but God, and Muhammad is God's messenger. Or, we can consider a more detailed list of the pillars of Muslim belief: Belief in God, his angels, his books, his messengers, in the last day and resurrection, and in God's foreknowledge and control of all affairs while giving humans limited free will. Which of these cardinal doctrines of Islam does the manuscript evidence undermine? Jay could not show that any of these doctrines rests on a change that someone made to the Quran.

Rather, as is well known to students of Quranic manuscripts, the variations which have been found in the manuscripts are mostly minor, and the most major ones reflect basically the same idea expressed in a varied manner.

## Who's Afraid of Manuscripts?

On the other hand, students of the Bible know that in fact the manuscript evidence for the Bible has led to questions about cardinal Christian concepts. Jay mentioned his view that 1 John 5:7 was not original to the Bible. The removal of this verse has an important consequence which Jay simply whitewashed. For three hundred years, Christians read this verse in their King James Bible as saying that there are three that bear record in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and that these three are one. There is no other verse of the Bible with this wording. Now that manuscript evidence has made it necessary for this wording to be removed from the verse, the Bible is left without a verse that specifically says that there are three that bear witness in heaven and that the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit are one. This leaves wide open the question of the basis on which Christians can limit the Godhead to three persons.

Therefore, Jay is using two different criteria: a strict criterion applying to the Quran; and a loose criterion applying to the Bible. Moreover, he is trying to deny the obvious fact that the manuscript evidence has necessitated a major correction to the present Bible.

Moreover, Jay showed that he is not willing to remove the forged verse entirely from the Bible. In the debate he expressed his satisfaction that the verse is retained in a footnote for the sake of those who would still like to see it there. What he is referring to is the fact that some Christians are still reading the wording in the footnote and finding solace in the hope that this wording is true. In fact, there are still users of the King James Bible that contains the forged verse. There is even a New King James Version that simply retains the verse as it was since the year 1611. This too is widely used by Christians who find this and other questionable verses too favourable to forego. There are even Christians who insist that the only true Bible is the King James Bible!

To conclude, Jay has a looser criterion for the Bible as the Word of God: The Bible's status as the Word of God is not affected by manuscript evidence that the only verse therein which explicitly declares the oneness of three persons in heaven has been forged. Meanwhile, in arguing against the Quran by means of citing manuscript evidence, Jay was not refuting the Quran. He was merely attempting to refute the common Muslim belief that the Quran has not been changed in any way. However, it was necessary for Jay to have a single criterion and to apply this equally to both books.

## Conclusion

Now what of my five criteria? I have cited mathematical patterns in the Quran as proof that divine providence gave us the Quran as it is in the 1924 Egyptian edition which is now everywhere among Muslims.

What evidence is there that the Bible today is the Word of God? Jay did not cite any evidence that the Bible ever was the Word of God. Nor did he respond to my evidence showing that the Bible is not inspired; and that it contains sexually explicit passages; and that it contains a failed prophecy; etc.

I hope that reviewers of the debate will see for themselves that I was working with clear criteria derived from the Bible; that I applied these criteria fairly to both books; and that only the Quran passed these criteria while the Bible failed to meet its own criteria for being the Word of God. On the other hand, Jay did not seem to start with fair and balanced criteria that he was willing to apply to both books. The debate can be viewed here:

<http://new.livestream.com/accounts/291710/events/3400440>.

[1] Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2013) p. 36.

[2] Fred Donner, "The historian, the believer and the Quran," in *New Perspectives on the Quran: the Quran in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 35.

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October 7, 2014

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## Did the Original Disciples of Jesus Consider Him God?







## A Report on My Debate with Dr. James White at the University of Pretoria

Usually after a debate Dr. James White would quickly post a written report on his blog saying how well he fared during the debate. This time around I did not see such a report. It could be that James was busy, as he had to travel back to Phoenix the following day. During the Oct. 11 episode of The Dividing Line, however, James has given his impressions of the debate. The episode will be found here:

<http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php/2013/10/11/special-south-africa-report-dividing-line-at-1pm-edt-today/>.

Starting at about 27 minutes into that recording, James speaks about the series of debates he did in South Africa.

To balance the picture, I think it is only fitting that I should also give my impressions although each impression, his and mine, may be somewhat one-sided. I hope that the recordings will be soon available online thus allowing viewers to evaluate both sides of the debate.

The topic was, **"Did the Original Disciples of Jesus Consider Him God?"**

James had the first 25 minutes to speak. Given the topic, it was necessary for James to show evidence that the original disciples considered Jesus to be God. Instead, he cited one verse from James, several from Paul, and presented a summary of the Gospel of Mark. My response, naturally, was that the original disciples of Jesus should have been his focus. James, the brother of Jesus, was of course an important disciple of Jesus, but he was not one of the twelve, and in any case the letter of James in the Bible is not dependably his. As for Paul, it is universally accepted that he was not a disciple of Jesus, and Mark is traditionally said to be a disciple of Peter and hence not himself a disciple of Jesus. In short, James had spent the bulk of his opening speech speaking off topic. He was merely proving that belief in the divinity of Christ was early. He did not prove that the original disciples considered Jesus God.

For my part, I gave five main reasons for thinking that the original disciples did not consider Jesus God.

**First**, the disciples were Jewish monotheists. They would not have considered anyone but Jehovah as God.

**Second**, the speeches in Acts of the Apostles in the Bible are not entirely dependable. Whereas the disciples

can be seen in these speeches to grant some lofty titles to Jesus, these are Luke's own composition, not the actual speeches of the disciples.

**Third**, no writings survive from the disciples themselves. The Second Letter of Peter is admitted even by conservative scholars to be written after Peter's death. The First Letter of Peter is disputed as to whether or not Peter wrote it. Some scholars think he wrote it; others think he did not. Hence we cannot rely on that letter either. The Gospel of Matthew is now thought not to be from the disciple Matthew, since it is widely believed to be copied from Mark. The disciple Matthew is unlikely to have relied on the writing of a non-disciple, Mark, for information about Jesus. As for the Gospel of John, this too cannot in its present form be credited to the disciple John. This Gospel went through stages of editing which I described in summary form as follows. The disciple John, Son of Zebedee preached his memories of Jesus. A disciple of John took John's preaching and preached on it further. This disciple of the disciple eventually wrote the results of his preaching in the Gospel. As is generally known, preachers in the heat of their sermons tend to mix up the quoted material with their own explanations. This is what happened also when this disciple of the disciple preached. This explains why in John's Gospel it is often difficult to know where the quoted words of Jesus end and where the commentary of the writer begins. Moreover, a later editor inserted parts into the Gospel, and added the last chapter as well. In sum we have no dependable first-hand writing of the original disciples of Jesus.

**My fourth** reason for thinking that the original disciples did not consider Jesus God is that Paul's writings bear evidence that he was in conflict with the original disciples not only over questions of law but also over the question of monotheism. In **2 Corinthians 11:4**, it is clear that Paul's opponents were preaching what Paul calls 'another Jesus.' Elsewhere in Paul's writings it becomes clear that his opponents are the original disciples of Jesus and close followers of the disciples. Now, as Bruce Chilton mentioned, the original disciples' response to Paul's accusations are not found in the New Testament. Given the chance, the disciples can be expected to say that their Jesus was the original Jesus, and Paul's Jesus was the 'other Jesus.'

**Fifth**, Jesus himself is known to have taught that he is a man and not God. But the Gospels distorted the image of Jesus transforming him from a man to something greater. This can be seen as we compare Mark, the first Gospel, to Matthew and Luke. But this evolution can be seen even more as we compare Mark with John, the last of the four Gospels to be written.

These five reasons form a strong cumulative argument showing that the original disciples did not consider Jesus God.

James was clearly in a bind. He could not answer my points, and I had answered all of his main points. As I pointed out, James' thinking was not precise: he had missed the topic. His thinking was not historical: he did not show that the evidence he was adducing really go back to the disciples. And his reasoning was circular: for example, he cited Mark 10:18 to show that Jesus was claiming to be God. But his proof only works if he starts out by assuming that Jesus is God. Thus he argues that when Jesus asked: "Why do you call me good?" Jesus was alerting his listener that he is actually God. But if we do not assume that Jesus was God, which is the disputed point, James' proof does not work. It is then obvious that Jesus was distinguishing himself from God.

To get out of this bind, James twice claimed that I had handed the debate to him when I admitted that Paul took a reference to Jehovah (in **Isaiah 45:23**) and applied it to Jesus (in **Philippians 2:5-11**). This, as I pointed out, does not hand the debate to James, since our topic is not about whether or not Paul considered Jesus God. It was about whether or not the original disciples did so. In response to his repeated claim, I said that I have never seen a man lose a debate so badly while claiming that he has won it. In *The Dividing Line* James says that such a comment is unworthy of me. I would like some feedback on this. Was I wrong to say what I said?

Something happened during the cross examination which I am still trying to fathom. I asked James if Jesus in Mark's Gospel clearly says, "I am the Son of Man," while using the title for the one who was to come in the future. James replied in the affirmative. The passages in question were **Mark 13:25-27** and **14:61-63**. As I pointed out, anyone reading these passages can see that Jesus did not clearly say, "I am the Son of Man."

I invited James to correct his statement when he returned to the lectern. But, I do not recall that he did correct his statement. I am still trying to fathom his reticence to admit his error. Is the whole enterprise about winning debates at all costs? Or, are we in this with the expectation to benefit from seeing opposing points of view defended with honest research?

Now in *The Dividing Line* James twice referred to the topic of our debate as if the topic is about the belief of the 'earliest followers of Jesus.' I do not understand why he still thinks of the topic in such a vague manner after so much of the debate hinged on the precise formulation of the topic. The 'earliest followers of Jesus' is too vague a designation. How early is early? Paul may be classed as an early follower of Jesus on one interpretation. But our topic was deliberately worded to exclude Paul from the enquiry. The question was about the belief of the original disciples. They were twelve in number. Let's keep our eye on the ball.

In sum, my impression is that James' thinking about the topic was imprecise, his treatment of the New Testament was non-historical, his reasoning was imprecise, and he did not answer my five main points. I would like to hear of the impressions of independent reviewers of the debate, especially after the recordings are posted online.

Shabir Ally

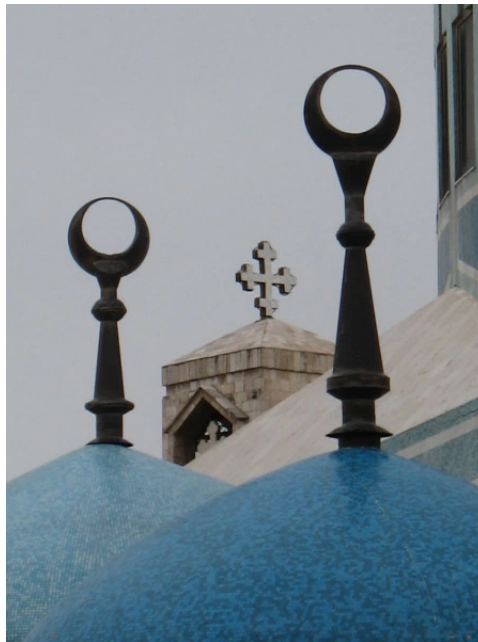
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 6 Replies

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In Dialogues Concerning Jesus Christ the Messiah



by Shabir Ally

### **The Similarities**

Jesus is one of the greatest persons ever to have walked the earth. Two world faiths hold him in high regard. Islam holds him to be God's Messiah, Prophet, and Righteous Servant. Christianity holds him to be all of the above and even more. Some Christians believe that Jesus is God the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Some believe that he is the Son of God. Some take this title to mean the Divine Son of God. Others think that 'Son of God' is a title that can refer to a person who is especially favoured by God; and that it refers to Jesus more so because he was favoured by God to a remarkable degree.

Hence belief in Jesus is an element of faith that is common to Christianity and Islam even though the two faiths believe in him differently. Both faiths hold Jesus in high esteem. Muslims and Christians believe that Jesus entered the world in a miraculous manner; that he worked mighty deeds on earth; that his exit was mysterious; and that his second coming will be spectacular. His miraculous entrance is hailed by Christians as the virginal conception, as is mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Quranic story of Jesus as found in chapters 3 and 19 has many elements in common with Luke's Gospel, leading to the common interpretation and belief among Muslims in the virginal conception as well.

Jesus' powerful deeds, especially during the last few years of his ministry, are detailed in the four Gospels in the New Testament. Likewise the Quran informs us that God supported Jesus with the Holy Spirit and that Jesus healed the leper, cured the blind, and even raised the dead back to life, all with God's permission.

According to the Gospels, Jesus' exit from the world was at first a mystery to his disciples. But the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John show that Jesus later appeared to his disciples and confirmed for them that God had raised him alive to heaven. The Quran, without describing the event in any detail, confirms for Muslims that "God raised Jesus to Himself" (Quran 4:157). The belief that Jesus is alive with God, then, is common to Muslims and Christians.

Muslims also generally believe that Jesus will return to earth before the Day of Judgment. This belief is not clearly stated in the Quran although two verses (4:158 and 43:61) have been interpreted as possible references to this event. This belief is, however, stated in many sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and found in the most authentic collections of his sayings.

In short, Muslims and Christians share a common reverence for Jesus, and this can serve as a starting-point

for dialogue leading to greater levels of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect.

## **The Differences**

Focusing on our commonalities, however, should not prevent us from being honest about our differences, for only in understanding our differences as well can we truly understand each other.

One area of difference is on the scriptural authority that settles questions for Muslims and Christians. For Christians the Bible is the Word of God. Some Christians add that the Bible is the Word of God and the word of man—that it is through the word of man that the Word of God is mediated. Many Christians believe that the authors of the Bible were basically free to write according to their knowledge and experiences, and that God controlled the process such that the result is in fact His Word without ceasing to be the words of the human authors. Some Christians believe that the process by which God inspired the writings that make up the Bible guarantees their inerrancy. Others believe that the Bible is free of error only in those matters on which human salvation depends.

Muslims believe in principle that any revelation from God must be accepted. Thus they believe in the Biblical prophets, especially as they are presented in the Quran. The Quran itself mentions some parts of the Bible as being based on scriptural revelations from God. In this way the Quran mentions the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus. But Muslims see no reason to believe that the Bible is the final revelation from God. They believe that after the Old and New Testaments God revealed a final testament: the Quran. For Muslims, therefore, the ultimate authority is the Quran itself. They believe it to be the final revelation from God confirming the truth of the previous scriptures and yet acting as a quality control on the previous scriptures (Quran 5:48).

Hence in principle Muslims accept as Divine revelation those parts of the Bible which are in agreement with the Quran. They hesitate, however about those parts which are in disagreement. For them, if the disagreeable part refers to the practices of the faith then the Quranic practices abrogate the old, and they follow the new. If the differences are matters of history or theology Muslims may consider these due to something lost in the translation or transmission of the Bible over the ages. Often in dialogue Muslims point to some passages which are noted in many modern Bibles as having been changed over time. An example of this is The First Letter of John, chapter 5, verse 7 which used to say, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and that these three are one" (1John 5:7). These words, however, have been removed from the verse in most modern versions because Biblical scholars have discovered that it is absent from the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of John's first letter.

Because Muslims and Christians accept different scriptural authorities, they may be expected to arrive at different conclusions about what to believe. This is why Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross as depicted in the Gospels. The Quran does not describe in detail what happened, but insists that Jesus' enemies did not manage to kill him. In response to those who said, "We killed the messiah, Jesus Son of Mary, the Messenger of God," the Quran says:

They killed him not, nor crucified him, but it was made so to appear to them. And those who differ about him are in doubt about him. They have no knowledge of him except the pursuit of a conjecture. They killed him not for certain. But God raised him to himself. And God is Mighty, Wise" (Quran 4:157).

The Quran does not say specifically how Jesus managed to escape the plot of his opponents. But Muslims believe that the Quran, though very brief, gives God's viewpoint on the story of Jesus.

But the main point of difference on the question of Jesus' crucifixion is about the purpose of his purported death. For Christians, his death was not merely caused by sinful people, but was for the cause of sinful people. Jesus laid down his life for the sins of many, or, in an alternative view, for all people. There are various ways of explaining the efficacy of Jesus' death. Some believe that God accepts the death of Jesus as a substitute for sinful people who are henceforth spared their deserved penalties. Others believe that the

death of Jesus appeased the wrath of God and made it possible for people to be forgiven.

Muslims, however, believe that the matter is simple. God is Gracious. He can forgive his servants if he chooses; nothing impedes him. His promise is that he will forgive those who turn to him in repentance. If we sincerely repent of our sins against him, and do our best to repair the harm we have done to his creatures, his forgiveness is assured. On this point Muslims and Christians seem to agree. For even on the view that Jesus died for our sins Christians also insist on the need for repentance and a return from sinful ways. Moreover, Muslims find it difficult to understand how a just God can punish an innocent person in order to free the guilty.

Finally, despite their agreement about Jesus, Muslims and Christians also disagree about him. Muslims find it puzzling to think of Jesus as God and man at the same time, for this seems to combine two contrary features in the same person. If he was God he only appeared to be a man. And if he was really a man with some of the imperfections this entails then he was not the perfect God in whom Muslims and Christians believe.

Even more perplexing for Muslims is the doctrine that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. For Muslims, there is only one God, and Jesus is one of his greatest creatures. Christians agree that there is only one God. But they add that the one God subsists in three persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To Muslims, however, the Holy Spirit is the angel Gabriel; and of the three persons only The Father, whom Muslims call Allah, can be truly God. Hence the simple Muslim declaration of faith: "There is no god but God."

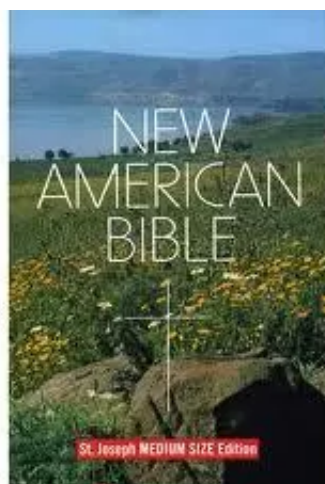
The dialogue between Christians and Muslims must continue, and this will, we hope, lead to a greater level of understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. We have only sketched here some of the main issues that need to be discussed as starting points for the achievement of such mutual appreciation. These two world faiths together are followed by half of the world's population. If they work together they can combat many of the ills that plague our world at present.

June 19, 2013

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## Confessions of the New American Bible



By Shabir Ally

The New American Bible is an official Christian Bible. Yet it contains many points of interest and value to the

Muslim caller to Islam. Every caller who intends to use the Bible for Dawah should get a copy of this Bible. Get especially (if you can) the St. Joseph Medium Size Edition.

The introduction to this Bible includes an article entitled: How to Read Your Bible. This article makes a lot of valuable points. I reproduce for your edification some of the main points offered in that introduction. Everything listed in the points below is directly asserted in the article itself or implied therein. I have only summarized. I did not improvise. Where I use my own words I still represent the ideas of the authors. Often, you will notice the presence of quotations marks. These mark off the included words as the words actually used by the editors of the New American Bible, St. Joseph Medium Size Edition. The article from which the points are drawn is found on pages 17 to 35 of the introduction. Consider these points; use them politely and wisely.

### **What the Scholars confess about the Bible in General**

**The Bible is not necessarily the most read book or the best understood book.**

The Bible was inspired by God. But "This does not mean that God dictated His message as a businessman dictates a letter to a secretary. God takes the author as he is and leaves him free to choose his own means of communication."

**"Some authors chose existing folk tales and even beast fables to bring out their point."**

There is a difference between INSPIRATION and REVELATION. The entire Bible is inspiration but not the whole Bible is revelation. The authors of the Bible were inspired to search for meaning in life and in the events of history. The search for answers was inspired, but the answers found were not necessarily revealed by God. But some of those answers are written in the Bible by the human authors. Some of what they wrote clearly cannot be attributed to God. "Think of the 'holy wars' of total destruction, fought by the Hebrews when they invaded Palestine. The search for meaning in those wars centuries later was inspired, but the conclusions which attributed all those atrocities to the command of God were imperfect and provisional."

An example of such atrocities is in Judges 1:1-18. Read it for yourself.

The Bible is a collection of many books of different kinds. "A major disadvantage is that these books are not put together systematically as the books of a modern library."

**"Edifying interpretation of events" is "often intermingled" with history.**

"The Bible is God's word and man's word. One must understand man's word first in order to understand the word of God."

**The Bible contains "Beast Fables." Examples: Genesis; Numbers 22, 22-35.**

Speeches of persons in the Bible are not necessarily what the persons said. "It is the inspired author who wants to state something by putting these words into the mouth of a person with authority."

**The book known as Acts of the Apostles in the Bible often puts words into the mouths of its characters.**

The description of the heavens and the earth in Genesis, chapter 1, is not necessarily a true description. That description is conditioned by the time and culture in which it was written. "Do not be shocked about this!"

**"The sacred writers attribute quite a number of human characteristics to God." This too is "conditioned by time and culture."**

The Psalms are a collection of poems full of feeling. Psalm 137, verses 8 and 9 pronounces a blessing on one who grabs a Babylonian baby and dashes it against a rock. In this psalm "The feeling, the thought, the total poem is inspired (guided) by God, though it is not necessarily revealed truth!" But this is not the only



Psalm which is not necessarily revealed truth. To find out for yourself, "Read some psalms!"

### **What the scholars confess about the Gospels in particular**

"What did the authors of the Gospels do? In the congregations, mainly in the cities around the Mediterranean, they found scores of narratives about Jesus, the beloved Founder of the Christian faith. The writers took those narratives and frequently even remolded and refashioned them to bring out the lesson they wanted to teach."

Therefore the four Gospels are not really biographies of Jesus. They are "digests of Christian teaching concerning the risen Lord Jesus."

"A remarkable fact is that for a long time Christians misunderstood" this truth about the Gospels.

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel chapter 1, verses 1-17, is not an absolutely true genealogy. First, Matthew took it perhaps from the family of Joseph. Second, "the sacred writer refashioned this document to a list of three times fourteen ancestors."

"Reading the Gospels, one should distinguish historical facts from theological elaboration."

The Gospels often represent Jesus in controversy and conversation. "One may ask: Was Jesus involved in these conversations? Did He answer exactly as related in the Bible? It is not certain."

There may be some true events and "controversies which supplied the background materials for the conflict stories of the Gospels. But as these accounts now stand, they are literary forms used by the Gospel writers in their catechisms to bring out what they had to tell the opponents of early Christianity."

Matthew tells us that baby Jesus was taken to Egypt. This is not necessarily true. But since Israel had been in Egypt, and since Israel was God's chosen one, Matthew placed Jesus in Egypt to convince his readers that Jesus was the real Israel. "This is a strange literary device, but the ancient writers loved to work with this kind of figurative speech."

"It is difficult to know whether the words or sayings attributed to [Jesus] are written exactly as He spoke them."

"True, the Gospels are based on sound historical facts as related by eye-witnesses, but both deeds and words of Jesus are offered to us in the framework or theological interpretation."

Did Jesus say the things which the Gospels report? "The Church was so firmly convinced that the risen Lord who is the Jesus of history lived in her, and taught through her, that she expressed her teaching in the form of Jesus' sayings." The words are not Jesus but from the Church.

"Can we discover at least some words of Jesus that have escaped such elaboration? Bible scholars point to the very short sayings of Jesus, as for example those put together by Matthew in chapter 5, 1-12"

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapters 5 to 7, was delivered by Jesus while he was on a mount – or was he? Matthew only represented the matter such in order to show that Jesus was like Moses who received the law on Mount Sinai. Jesus was not really on a mountain. This is only a figurative device used by Matthew.

"Walk into a modern library, you will find all the books neatly arranged under fiction and non-fiction. It is not that simple in the library called the Bible. How does one know whether one deals with history or some form of figurative speech?" To begin with you should always be disposed to follow the teaching authority of the Church."

"The signature of a bishop in your Bible assures you that opinions, expressed in footnotes and introductions,



reflect what is generally accepted as sound doctrine in the Catholic tradition.”

“Knowing that early Christians mistakenly expected Christ’s second coming during their own lifetime, helps you to understand 1 and 2 Thessalonians.” The first of these two books in the Bible is written under the said mistaken expectation.

“The Hebrews [who wrote the Bible] were restless searchers for meaning in our human condition. Reading their inspired literature should challenge you to go on with a faithful search for meaning in your own situation.”

There you have it folks. A collection of confessions of the scholars who edited the New American Bible. The words within quotation marks are their own. All the ideas are their own. Some of the said ideas they have explicitly stated; others they clearly imply. Words within square brackets were inserted where necessary to make the points clear. Use these points to help convince Catholics.

The title page of this Bible shows that the book is “authorized by the Board of Trustees of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine” and “approved by the Administrative Committee/Board of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops” and the “United States Catholic Conference.” It is published by the Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, 1986. The Bible contains all the necessary Catholic certification: the Nihil Obstat, and the Imprimatur from the Archbishop of Washington. And, oh, yes! A letter from the Vatican, including the signature of the Pope, appears in the preface to guarantee the reliability of this Bible for Catholics.

Protestants and others may not be convinced by the confessions. They may object that these are not their own scholars. Yet many Protestant scholars have reached the very same conclusions. But that is the subject for another article. Notice, however, that you can always argue that the points above are admitted by friends of the Bible. Even one who does not recognise the authority of Catholic Bishops will have to admit that they are nevertheless friends of the Bible. Their testimony above cannot be discounted so easily.

Muslim callers to Allah will find it advantageous to obtain a copy of the said Bible and use it wisely. Always present your points with respect and love. Do not seek to defeat the other person with clever arguments, but seek to win him over with courtesy and persuasive speech.

May 26, 2013

 2 Replies

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## Quick Question Regarding “Thus We Have Made You a Middle Nation” Verse

**“And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people**

**and the Messenger will be a witness over you.”**

**The Noble Quran 2:143**

### Question;

*As you know Surah 2:143 happens to be the middle verse of Surah Baqarah (Chapter 2 of the Quran) which states, "And thus have made you a middle nation".*

*What if someone were to object and say that you can find other different numbering schemes of the Quarn, for example what, if Basmala is counted as a verse?*

### Answer:

We can reply that we are simply going by the numbering which just so happens (we would say by the will of Allah) to be most widespread. On this basis the verse number is half the number of verses in the chapter.

But if, for argument's sake one started numbering from the 'Basmala' then each verse number will be increased by one, and the chapter would have a total of 287 verses. That would also mean that the verse in question will now be numbered 144, and in that case there will be 143 verses before it and 143 verses after it. Even then it would be in the middle of the Surah.

Shabir

**-For further clarification to this question please see;-**

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April 10, 2013

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